

CONSOLATION FOR BELIEVERS WHO FEAR THE WORST

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Content Warning: The Qur'an, the Sunnah and the Islamic tradition have much to offer us in the way of consolation when our worst fears are realized. This article might not be what many people want to, or need to, contemplate. It might be upsetting to some. No one should feel it is necessary that they read this article. However, there are others who might find their distress and anxiety lessened when they name their worst fears and realize that God gives us guidance and support for every situation.

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People across the world have been negatively affected by the coronavirus pandemic. When people are faced with a threat, a tragedy, or upsetting news, such as the death of a loved one, it is normal to be upset and to express one's feelings. Deep sadness and deep faith can co-exist in the heart of the believer. Allah describes Prophet Ya'qub as filled with "grief" and "sorrow" at the disappearance of Yusuf and the detention of his other son, and his awareness that his older sons were engaged in devious behaviour.

Still, Prophet Ya'qub said "*do not despair of God's mercy; only a disbelieving people despair of God's mercy.*" (Yusuf 12:86; part of 87) Here, it is important to point out that the Qur'an does not say that *anyone* who falls into despair is a disbeliever.

Rather, Prophet Ya‘qub says “a disbelieving people” – *al-qawm al-kafirun*. In other words, there are groups whose ideological position is one of denial of God, and their answer to those who fall into despair is that their life has no purpose or meaning. This brings home the responsibility of the Muslim community to support those believers who are grieving, through sound teachings and effective pastoral care, to prevent them from falling into despair or to accompany them out of it.

Many believers are finding the current situation especially challenging because public health regulations are preventing many people from being present with their loved ones when they are hospitalized and even when they are dying. Muslim communities are sometimes prevented from fulfilling their collective obligation to wash and shroud the dead as required by our faith. Regular congregational janazah prayers cannot be conducted and only small numbers of people can pray for the dead. Sometimes, the bodies of the believers are treated in ways that violate their sacred inviolability.

This article is a humble attempt to offer consolation to believers who are afraid they will find themselves in one of these situations, either because they themselves might fall ill and die during this time, or that this might happen to someone they love. In addition, I want to address those who are afraid that experiencing any of these unusual circumstances means that Allah is displeased with them or with their loved ones.

Fear that hardship and loss are signs of Allah’s displeasure

The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said, “How amazing is the situation of the believer. It is always good for him and this benefit is for no one except a believer. If he is granted ease in his life, he is grateful, and that is best for him. And if he is afflicted with hardship and he perseveres then this is best for him.” (Muslim)

Abu Sa‘id al-Khudari (*ra*) report that the blessed Prophet ﷺ said, “Whenever a Muslim is afflicted with hardship, illness, sadness, anxiety or depression – even a thorn’s prick – God expiates their sins because of it.” (Bukhari and Muslim)

The blessed Prophet ﷺ said, “The Muslims should find honor in their tragedies because of my tragedies.” (Muwatta)

What tragedies did the blessed Prophet ﷺ experience? His father died before he was born. His mother died when he was a young child. His beloved wife Khadijah (*ra*) died after having suffered for two years with him during the Meccan boycott. All of his children, except for one, died during his lifetime, some as babies, and some as adults.

These are just some of the personal losses the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ faced, yet no one has ever been so loved by God. Therefore, no believer who has similar losses should consider their difficulties and losses as signs that Allah is not pleased with them.

Just as difficulty in life is not a sign of God’s displeasure, the same is true of the physical discomfort one might experience in death. The Mother of the Believers ‘A’isha (*ra*) reported that the Messenger of Allah ﷺ experienced significant discomfort when he was dying. (Tirmidhi)

All of this does not mean that we should seek discomfort or reject medications that could ease pain during a terminal illness. *Allah wishes to lighten your burden, for the human was created weak.* (Nisa’ 4:2) Only Allah knows what each one of us is able to endure and it is from Allah’s mercy if we have access to medicine that can ease distressing symptoms during the process of dying. The Prophet ordered us to not to seek out trials and hardship because we might not be able to endure them. (Tirmidhi)

Fear of dying during the pandemic

We pray that those believers who die from the coronavirus as well as those who die of other causes specified by the Messenger of Allah ﷺ will be counted among the martyrs, and Allah knows best who will be accepted as a martyr.

When ‘Abdullah b. Thabit (ra) was ill, the Messenger of Allah ﷺ went to visit him, but found him already unconscious; he called out to him, but he did not respond. The Prophet ﷺ said, “To God we belong and to him we return,” then he said, “We were too late to reach you Abu Rabi’.” Sometimes, even the blessed Prophet ﷺ was unable to make it in time to the bedside of a dying person he loved. The Prophet instructed the women of the family to avoid keening (loud ritual mourning in the manner of the pre-Islamic Arabs) “when the inevitable happens”. They asked, “What do you mean by “the inevitable” and he ﷺ said “when he dies.” Then ‘Abdullah’ daughter spoke to her unconscious father saying, “By God, I really had hoped you would die a martyr, for you had already equipped yourself for battle.” The Prophet ﷺ said, “God has already rewarded him in accordance with his intention. But what do you think makes someone a martyr?” They said, “Dying on the battlefield for the sake of God.” The Prophet ﷺ said, “There are seven other kinds of martyrs: those who die of the plague, those who die of drowning; those who die of pleurisy; those who die of a disease of the belly; those who die in a fire; those who die under a collapsed building; and women who die in childbirth.” (Muwatta)

Fear of dying alone

It is We who created the human and We know what their soul whispers to them; We are closer to them than their jugular vein. (Qaf 50:16)

Hospital walls present no barrier for Allah who is the Creator of time and space. God is present, knowing, hearing, seeing, accepting repentance, responding to our sincere prayers in every place and at every time. Allah never leaves us alone.

There will come a time for each one of us when those who surround us will fade, our bodies will shut down, and we will no longer be able to perceive what is present in this worldly life. To help believers transition to the next life, Allah sends angels who accompany and reassure them:

Surely those who say, “Our Lord is Allah,” then remain steadfast, the angels descend upon them saying, “Do not be afraid, do not be sad, but receive the good news of Paradise which you were promised. We are your supporters in the life of this world and in the Afterlife. There, you shall have whatever your souls desire, and there, you will have whatever you ask for.” (Fussilat 41: 30-31)

“ – those whom the angels will take in death while they are in a state of goodness (tayyiban), saying ‘Peace be upon you; enter the Garden by virtue of what you used to do’.” (Al-Anbiya 16:32)

Jabir ibn ‘Abdullah (ra) reported that the blessed Prophet ﷺ said, “None of you should die without having a good opinion of Allah, Who is Exalted.” (Muslim) If you are admitted to the hospital and your family cannot accompany you, trust that the Most-Merciful will bring you what you need.¹

[1] Meanwhile, family, friends and the community must strive to advocate for those who are hospitalized to have adequate support. Virtual presence should be facilitated with technology; the voices of family expressing love, singing and reciting the shahadah can be recorded and looped; Qur’an recitation can be played. God willing, you will be able to reach kind health care providers and staff who are happy to help out and who will have some of their own distress relieved when they can easily facilitate the emotional and spiritual needs of their patients.

Fear of not having a proper shroud

Muslims have the communal obligation to shroud the dead in a few lengths of simple, clean fabric if possible; for those martyred in battle, the rules are different. Sometimes, there is not sufficient cloth, or the circumstances do not permit access to the body of the dead. In this case, as in all situations, the community is required to do what is possible, and is absolved of sin if what is normally required is impossible.

The Companion Khabbab (*ra*) reported that when Mus‘ab ibn ‘Umayr (*ra*) was killed, they could not find any cloth with which to shroud his body, except for Mus‘ab’s own cloak. It was too short to cover his whole body. When they covered his head with it, his legs were exposed, and when they covered his legs, his head was exposed. The Prophet ﷺ instructed them to cover his head with the garment and cover his legs with branches from a rue plant.

The Sahabah who lived to see the Muslims attain a state of greater material comfort sometimes felt that those who had died earlier in austere times were more blessed by Allah. One day, the Companion ‘Abd al-Rahman ibn ‘Auf (*ra*), was served a meal; he looked at it and said, “Mus‘ab ibn ‘Umayr was killed, and he was better than me, and nothing was found to shroud him except for a black cloak (*burda*). And Hamza (or another companion) who was better than me was killed, and nothing was found to shroud him in except for a *burda*. I am afraid that the reward for our good deeds might have been advanced to us in the life of this world.” Then he began to cry. (Bukhari)

The Messenger of Allah ﷺ wrapped every two martyrs of Uhud in one piece of cloth; they were not washed, nor did he offer the funeral prayer for them. (S. Bukhari) In most cases, no janazah was conducted by the Prophet ﷺ for martyrs, and that has remained the standard ruling in Islam for martyrs on the battlefield. This practice is not normally extended to the other categories of martyrs, but in these abnormal circumstances, perhaps this can give us greater confidence in the current change in practices. There is no shame in not having a ritual washing or shrouding if it cannot be done.

At the same time, because these practices provide much comfort for the families of the deceased, it is important that they find other acceptable ways to express their love, to make dua, to show appreciation and say good-bye to their loved one. A Muslim pastoral care professional might be able to help. Just remember that this is not necessarily your final good-bye, but only a temporary parting, until you meet again, God willing, under the shade of Allah’s mercy.

Fear of not having a janazah in the masjid

Many Muslims feel that if a janazah is held in any place other than the masjid, then it is somehow deficient. In fact, while it is permissible to pray the janazah prayer in the masjid, it is not preferable. The preferred option, based on the predominant practice of the Prophet ﷺ is to have a designated musalla outside the masjid where the janazah is conducted. It is also in this outdoor musalla that the Prophet ﷺ would lead the Eid prayer. Most North American and European mosques do not have an outdoor musalla due to space and weather restrictions, and that is why we pray the janazah inside the masjid.

It is permissible to pray the janazah in the cemetery. Nafi‘ reported that he and the other Sahaba and Tabi‘un prayed over the Mothers of the Believers ‘A’isha and Umm Salama (*ra*) in the middle of al-Baqi’, the cemetery beside the Prophet’s mosque in Medina, and this was done for many others as well. (‘Abd al-Razzaq, *Musannaf*)

Fear of not having a (large) congregational janazah

There is no doubt that it is a blessing for the dead to have a large number of believers participate in their janazah. 'A'isha (ra) reported that the Messenger of Allah ﷺ said, "if someone dies and a group of Muslims numbering one hundred prays over them, interceding for them, that intercession will be accepted." (Muslim) And Ibn 'Abbas said, "I heard the Messenger of Allah ﷺ say, 'There is no Muslim man who dies and forty men who associate nothing with Allah pray for him, except that Allah will accept them as intercessors for him.'" (Muslim)

At the same time, it is not true that having a small number of worshippers at one's janazah is a sign of Allah's displeasure. 'Uthman ibn 'Affan (ra) was one of the Prophet Muhammad's closest companions; the Prophet ﷺ married two of his precious daughters (the second after the first one had died) to 'Uthman, and 'Uthman was one of the ten men the Prophet ﷺ said would obtain Paradise. After 'Uthman was assassinated, hostile and coarse people interfered with his family's attempt to hold a decent funeral prayer. Only five to twelve people were able to participate in his janazah, and he was buried quickly at twilight. (Tabari, Ta'rikh)

Abu Dharr (ra) was another of the Prophet's beloved companions. One day, the Prophet said, "Allah's mercy is with Abu Dharr, he walks alone, he will die alone and he will be resurrected alone." The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said that the Abu Dharr was, for the Muslim community, the person who walked a path of asceticism (*zuhd*) in the manner of Jesus the Son of Mary. Because of his asceticism, Abu Dharr disliked the changes he saw in the Muslim community over time, and because of his criticisms, he ended up living in the desert with only a few family members. When he died, there was not enough cloth in the house to shroud him well, and only a few people, whom Allah had destined to travel on the road beside his home soon after his death, participated in his janazah. (Ibn Sa'd; Tabari)

A very small number of people can constitute a congregational janazah. When 'Umayr bin Abi Talha died, his father asked the Prophet ﷺ to come to his home to pray over him. The Prophet ﷺ led the prayer with Abu Talha behind him and Umm Sulaym behind Abu Talha. There were only three people in the congregation: two men and one woman. (al-Hakim; Bayhaqi)

Although there is disagreement on this matter, many scholars say that it is permissible for the imam of the community to lead a janazah prayer at the grave at a later time if only a few people were able to pray for the dead at the time of burial, and some scholars permit the imam of the community and anyone else who did not have the chance to join a congregational janazah to pray individually at the grave after burial. In some cases there is also the possibility to make the janazah prayer *in absentia* - *salat al-gha'ib*. Please discuss these options with a Muslim scholar you consider an authority in these matters.

When the blessed Prophet ﷺ died, the Sahaba did not have a congregational janazah for him; they prayed individually or in small groups over him. (Malik, *Muwatta*) Scholars have offered different reasons for why the Sahaba did this, since the Prophet's practice was to convene a congregational janazah. Some believe it was because of the humility of the Sahaba, or their desire to avoid conflict over how this should be done. Scholars therefore see this as an exception, and not the basis for the regular practice of the Muslims. Nevertheless, it can never be bad for a believer to experience anything the blessed Prophet ﷺ experienced. If public health restrictions prevent a Muslim from having a congregational janazah performed over them, and instead only individuals are able to pray the janazah over them, perhaps there is a hidden blessing for them in this. Allah knows best.

Fear of being cremated

It is a violation of the Sunnah to burn the bodies of the dead. Muslims should invoke their rights to religious freedom and engage in advocacy with allies of other faith communities to prevent authorities from cremating the bodies of the Muslims. If the community does everything possible to prevent this from happening, yet is unable to stop it, then they are free of blame. Allah says, *Fear Allah as much as you are able.* (Taghabun 64:16)

It also needs to be emphasized that no harm or blames falls upon the believer whose body is burned. One proof of this is the hadith of the blessed Prophet ﷺ that believers who die in a fire are counted as martyrs. The same fire that kills those believers will also, in some cases, incinerate their bodies.

The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ told the Sahabah: There was a man who had never done a pious deed in his life, so he said to his children, “When I die, burn me to ashes and divide the ashes into two parts: scatter one part on land and the other in the ocean. By God, if my Lord gets a hold of this body, he will punish it like never before!” When the man died, his children obeyed his instructions. But God commanded the land to gather his ashes so the land collected every particle of his ashes from itself. Then God commanded the ocean, and it too gathered all the particles even from its depths. Then He asked him, “Why did you do that?” He said, “My Lord, out of fear of you!” So God forgave him. (Muslim)

No matter how a person’s body degrades, Allah is fully Capable (*al-Qadir*) of re-embodiment each and every soul. No matter how we die, no matter whether we are shrouded or are not shrouded, whether we are buried or left unburied, whether our bodies are intact or not when we are buried, whether we have one person, or one hundred people at our janazah, Allah will resurrect each one of us.

Does the human suppose that We shall not gather his bones? In fact, We are capable of restoring even his fingertips. (Qiyama 75:3-4)

Believers: this is your Lord – the Merciful; the Creator – *Al-Rahman; Al-Khaliq* – who will bring you back to life and give you a new body. This is your Lord who will open Paradise even to one whose only attitude towards God is one of fear. I hope that this article will help quell some of your fears, but know that Allah accepts even your fear as acknowledgement that we all have only one Lord and that we are ultimately accountable only to Him. ●